

R.A. SALVATORE THE LAST THRESHOLD



COVER ART
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The NeverwinterTM Saga, Book IV

THE LAST THRESHOLD

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The Year of the Reborn Hero (1463 DR)

OU CANNOT PRESUME THAT THIS CREATURE IS NATURAL, IN ANY SENSE OF the word," the dark-skinned Shadovar woman known as the Shifter told the old graybeard. "She is perversion incarnate."

The old druid Erlindir shuffled his sandal-clad feet and gave a great "harrumph!"

"Incarnate, I tell you." The Shifter tapped her finger against the old druid's temple and ran it delicately down under his eye and across his cheek to touch his crooked nose.

"So, you're really in front of me this time," Erlindir cackled, referring to the fact that when one addressed the Shifter, typically one was actually addressing a projected image, a phantasm, of the most elusive enchantress.

"I told you that you could trust me, Birdcaller," she replied, using a nickname she'd given him when she had met him at his grove many months before.

"If I didn't believe you, would I have come to this place?" He looked around at the dark images of the Shadowfell, his gaze settling on the twisted keep and tower before him, with its many spires and multiple—likely animated—gargoyles, all leering at him and smiling hungrily. They had just journeyed through a most unpleasant swamp, reeking of death and decay and populated by undead monstrosities. This castle was not much of an improvement.

"Why, Erlindir, you flatter me so," the Shifter teased, and she grabbed him by the chin and directed his gaze back to her face. Her spell wouldn't last forever, she knew, and she didn't want any of the unnatural images to shake the druid from his stupor. Erlindir was of the old school, after all, a disciple of the nature goddess Mielikki. "But remember why you are here."

"Yes, yes," he replied, "this unnatural cat. You would have me destroy it, then?"

"Oh, no, not that!" the Shifter exclaimed.

Erlindir looked at her curiously.

"My friend Lord Draygo has the panther," the Shifter explained. "He is a warl—*mage* of great renown and tremendous power." She paused to watch the druid's reaction, fearing that her near slip-up might clue the old one into her ruse. There was a reason that swamp teemed with undead creatures. No druid, charmed or not, would be so eager to help a warlock.

"Lord Draygo fears that the cat's master is crafting other . . . abominations," she lied. "I would like you to grant him affinity to the cat, that he might see through her eyes when she is summoned home, and cut her bindings to the Astral Plane and anchor her here instead."

Erlindir looked at her suspiciously.

"Only for a short time," she assured him. "We will destroy the cat when we're sure that her master is not perverting nature for his ill intent. And destroy him, too, if needed."

"I would rather that you bring him to me, that I might learn the damage he has already caused," Erlindir said.

"So be it," the enchantress readily agreed, since lies came so easily to her lips.



"The gates were harder to maintain," Draygo Quick whispered through his crystal ball to his peer, Parise Ulfbinder, a fellow high-ranking and powerful warlock who lived in a tower similar to Draygo's in Shade Enclave, but upon the soil of Toril. "And my understudy told me that the shadowstep back to his home was not as easily accomplished as he had expected."

Parise stroked his small black beard—which, to Draygo, seemed curiously exaggerated in the contours of the crystal ball. "They warred with drow, did they not? And with drow spellspinners, no doubt."

"Not at that time, I don't believe."

"But there were many drow in the bowels of Gauntlgrym."

"Yes, that is what I have been told."

"And Glorfathel?" Parise asked, referring to an elf mage of the mercenary group Cavus Dun, who had disappeared quite unexpectedly and quickly in Gauntlgrym right before the important confrontation.

"No word," Draygo Quick said. And he added quickly, "Yes, it is possible that Glorfathel created some magical waves to impede our retreat. We do not know that he betrayed us. Only the dwarf priestess."

Parise sat back and ran his fingers through his long black hair. "You don't think it was Glorfathel who hindered the shadowsteps," he stated.

Draygo Quick shook his head.

"You don't think it was the work of drow mages, either, or of the priestess," said Parise.

"The shadowstep was more difficult," Draygo argued. "There is change in the air."

"The Spellplague was change," Parise said. "The advent of Shadow was change. The new reality is now simply settling."

"Or the old reality is preparing to return?" Draygo Quick asked. At the other end of the crystal ball, Parise Ulfbinder could only sigh and shrug.

It was just a theory, after all, a belief based on the reading by Parise, Draygo Quick, and some others, of "Cherlrigo's Darkness," a cryptic sonnet found in a letter written by the ancient wizard Cherlrigo. Cherlrigo claimed he'd translated the poem from *The Leaves of One Grass*, a now-lost tome penned nearly a thousand years before, based on prophecies from almost a thousand years before that.

"The world is full of prophecies," Parise warned, but there seemed little conviction in his voice. He had been with Draygo when they had retrieved the letter, after all, and the amount of trouble and the power of the curses they had found along with the page seemed to give its words some measure of weight.

"If we are to take Cherlrigo's word for it, the tome in which he found this sonnet, was penned in Myth Drannor," Draygo Quick reminded Parise. "By the Dark Diviners of Windsong Tower. That is no book of rambling delusions by some unknown prognosticator." Nay, but it is a book of cryptic messaging," said Parise.

Draygo Quick nodded, conceding that unfortunate fact.

"The proposition of the octave calls it a temporary state," Parise went on. "Let us not react in fear to that which we do not fully comprehend."

"Let us not rest while the world prepares to shift around us," the old warlock countered.

"To a temporary state!" Parise replied.

"Only if the second quatrain is decoded as a measurement of time and not space," Draygo Quick reminded.

"The turn of the ninth line is a clear hint, my friend."

"There are many interpretations!"

Draygo Quick sat back, tapped the tips of his withered fingers together before his frown, and inadvertently glanced at the parchment that lay face down at the side of his desk. The words of the sonnet danced before his eyes, and he mumbled, "And enemies that stink of their god's particular flavor."

"And you know of just such a favored one?" Parise asked, but his tone suggested that he already knew the answer.

"I might," Draygo Quick admitted.

"We must watch these chosen mortals."

Draygo Quick was nodding before Parise began to utter the expected reminder.

"Are you to be blamed for the loss of the sword?" Parise asked.

"It is Herzgo Alegni's failure!" Draygo Quick protested, a bit too vehemently. Parise Ulfbinder pursed his thick lips and furrowed his brow.

"They will not be pleased with me," Draygo Quick admitted.

"Appeal privately to Prince Rolan," Parise advised, referring to the ruler of Gloomwrought, a powerful Shadowfell city within whose boundaries lay Draygo Quick's own tower. "He has come to believe in the significance of 'Cherlrigo's Darkness.'"

"He fears?"

"There is a lot to lose," Parise admitted, and Draygo Quick found that he couldn't disagree. At a sound in the corridor outside his door, the old warlock nodded farewell to his associate and dropped a silken cloth atop his scrying device.

He heard the Shifter's voice—she spoke with one of his attendants still some distance away—and knew that she had brought the druid, as they had arranged. With still a few moments left to him, Draygo Quick picked up the parchment and held it before his eyes, digesting the sonnet once more.

Enjoy the play when shadows steal the day . . .

All the world is half the world for those who learn to walk. To feast on fungus soft and peel the sunlit stalk;

Tarry not in place, for in their sleep the gods do stay. But care be known, be light of foot and soft of voice.

Dare not stir divine to hasten Sunder's day!

A loss profound but a short ways away;

The inevitable tear shall't be of, or not of, choice.

Oh, aye, again the time wandering of lonely world!

With kingdoms lost and treasures past the finger's tip,

And enemies that stink of their god's particular flavor.

Sundered and whole, across the celestial spheres are hurled,

Beyond the reach of dweomer and the wind-walker's ship;

With baubles left for the ones the gods do favor.

"Of which god's particular flavor do you taste, Drizzt Do'Urden?" he whispered. All signs—Drizzt's affinity to nature, his status as a ranger, the unicorn he rode—pointed to Mielikki, a goddess of nature, but Draygo Quick had heard many other whispers that suggested Drizzt as a favored child of a very different and much darker goddess.

Either way, the withered old warlock held little doubt that this rogue drow was favored by some god. At this point in his investigation, it hardly mattered which.

He replaced "Cherlrigo's Darkness" face down when he heard the knock on the door, and slowly rose and turned as he bade the Shifter and her companion to enter.

"Welcome, Erlindir of Mielikki," he said graciously, and he wondered what he might learn of that goddess, and perhaps her "flavors" in addition to the tasks the Shifter had already convinced him to perform for Draygo.

"Is this your first visit to the Shadowfell?" Draygo Quick asked.

The druid nodded. "My first crossing to the land of colorless flowers," he replied.

Draygo Quick glanced at the Shifter, who nodded confidently to indicate to him that Erlindir was fully under her spell.

"You understand the task?" Draygo Quick asked the druid. "That we might further investigate this abomination?"

"It seems easy enough," Erlindir replied.

Draygo Quick nodded and waved his hand out toward a side door, bidding Erlindir to lead the way. As the druid moved ahead of him, the old warlock fell in step beside the Shifter. He let Erlindir go into the side chamber before them, and even bade the druid to give him a moment, then shut the door between them.

"He does not know of Drizzt?" he asked.

"He is from a faraway land," the Shifter whispered back.

"He will make no connection with the panther and the drow, then? The tales of this one are considerable, and far-reaching."

"He does not know of Drizzt Do'Urden. I have asked him directly."

Draygo Quick glanced at the door. He was glad and a bit disappointed. Certainly if Erlindir knew of Drizzt and Guenhwyvar, this task could be troublesome. He could recognize the panther and such a shock might well defeat the Shifter's dweomer of enchantment. But the gain could well outweigh the loss of his services, because Erlindir might then have offered, under great duress of course, the information regarding Drizzt's standing with the goddess Mielikki.

"He could not have deceived me in his response," the Shifter added. "For even then, I was in his thoughts, and a lie would have been revealed."

"Ah, well," Draygo Quick sighed.

The Shifter, who had no idea of the larger discussion taking place between Draygo Quick, Parise Ulfbinder, and several other Netherese Lords looked at him with some measure of surprise.

The old warlock met that look with an unremarkable and disarming smile. He opened the door and he and the Shifter joined Erlindir in the side chamber, where, under a silken cloth not unlike that covering his crystal ball, paced Guenhwyvar, trapped in a miniaturized magical cage.



Outside of Draygo Quick's residence, Effron Alegni watched and waited. He had seen the Shifter go in—her appearance, at least, for one never knew when one might actually be looking at the tireless illusionist. He didn't know her human companion, but the old man certainly was no shade, didn't look Netherese, and didn't look at all at home in the Shadowfell.

This was about the panther, Effron knew.

The thought gnawed at him. Draygo Quick had not given the panther back to him, but that cat was perhaps Effron's greatest tool in seeking his revenge against Dahlia. The Shifter had failed him in her dealings with the drow ranger, trying to trade the panther for the coveted Netherese sword, but Effron would not fail. If he could get the cat, he believed he could remove one of Dahlia's greatest allies from the playing board.

But Draygo Quick had forbidden it.

Draygo Quick.

Effron's mentor, so he had thought.

The withered old warlock's last words to him rang in his mind: "Idiot boy, I only kept you alive out of respect for your father. Now that he is no more, I am done with you. Be gone. Go and hunt her, young fool, that you might see your father again in the darker lands."

Effron had tried to return to Draygo, to remedy the fallout between them. He had been turned away by the old warlock's student servants, in no uncertain terms.

And now this—and Effron knew that the Shifter's visit had been precipitated by the old warlock's plans for the panther. Plans that did not include Effron. Plans that would not help Effron's pressing need.

Indeed, plans that would almost certainly hinder Effron's pressing need.

The twisted young tiefling, his dead arm swinging uselessly behind him, crouched in the dark brush outside of Draygo Quick's residence for much of the day.

Grimacing.



"You play dangerous games, old warlock," the Shifter said later that night, when she was collecting her coins from Draygo Quick.

"Not if you have done your research and enchantments correctly. Not if this Erlindir creature is half the druid you claim him to be."

"He is quite powerful. Which is why I'm surprised that you will let him return to Toril alive."

"Am I to kill every powerful wizard and cleric simply because?" Draygo Ouick asked.

"He knows much now," the Shifter warned.

"You assured me that he did not know of Drizzt Do'Urden and was nowhere near to him in the vast lands of Faerûn."

"True, but if he harbors any suspicion, isn't it possible that he put similar dweomers on himself as he did on you—to allow you to view the world through the panther's eyes?"

Draygo Quick's hand froze in place halfway to the shelf where he kept his Silverymoon brandy. He turned to face his guest. "Should I demand my coin back?"

The Shifter laughed easily and shook her head.

"Then why would you suggest such a thing?" Draygo Quick demanded. He let that hang in the air as her smile became coy. He grabbed the bottle and poured a couple of glasses, setting one down on the hutch and taking a sip from the other.

"Why, tricky lady," he asked at length, "are you trying to pry motives from me?"

"You admit that your . . . tactics would elicit my curiosity, yes?"

"Why? I have an interest in Lady Dahlia and her companions, of course. They have brought great distress to me, and I would be remiss if I did not repay them."

"Effron came to me," she said.

"Seeking the panther."

She nodded, and Draygo Quick noted that she held the brandy he had poured for her, though he hadn't handed it to her and she hadn't come to get it—or at least, she hadn't appeared to come and get it. "I know that Effron desperately wishes this Dahlia creature killed."

"More strength to him, then!" Draygo Quick replied with exuberance.

But the Shifter wasn't buying his feigned emotion, as she stood shaking her head.

"Yes, she is his mother," Draygo Quick answered her unspoken question. "From the loins of Herzgo Alegni. Dahlia threw him from a cliff immediately after his birth, the fiery elf. A pity the fall did not show mercy and kill him,

but he landed amongst some pines. The trees broke his fall and broke his spine, but alas, he did not succumb to death."

"His injuries—"

"Aye, Effron was, and remains, fairly broken," the warlock explained. "But Herzgo Alegni would not let him go. Not physically, and not even emotionally, for many years, until it became clear what little Effron would be."

"Twisted. Infirm."

"And by that time—"

"He was an understudy, a promising young warlock under the watchful eye of the great Draygo Quick," the Shifter reasoned. "And more than that, he became your bludgeon to crumble the stubborn will of the ever-troublesome Herzgo Alegni. He became valuable to you."

"It's a difficult world," Draygo Quick lamented. "One must find whatever tools one can to properly navigate the swirling seas."

He raised his glass in to ast and took another drink. The Shifter did likewise.

"And what tools do you seek now, through the panther?" she asked.

Draygo Quick shrugged as if it were not important. "How well do you know this Erlindir now?"

It was the Shifter's turn to shrug.

"He would welcome you to his grove?"

She nodded.

"He is a disciple of Mielikki," Draygo Quick remarked. "Do you know his standing?"

"He is a powerful druid, though his mind has dulled with age."

"But is he favored by the goddess?" Draygo Quick asked, more insistently than he had intended, as the Shifter's response—stiffening, her expression growing concerned—informed him.

"Would one not have to be, to be granted powers?"

"More than that," Draygo Quick pressed.

"Are you asking me if Erlindir is of special favor to Mielikki? Chosen?"

The old warlock didn't blink.

The Shifter laughed at him. "If he was, do you think I would have ever attempted such trickery with him? Do you consider me a fool, old warlock?"

Draygo Quick waved the silly questions away and took a sip, silently berating himself for so eagerly pursuing such a far-fetched idea. He was off his game, he realized. The intensity of his talks with Parise Ulfbinder were getting to him.

"Would this Erlindir know of others who might be so favored with his goddess?" he asked.

"The head of his order, likely."

"No—or perhaps," the warlock said. "I seek those favored ones, the ones known as 'Chosen'."

"Of Mielikki?"

"Of all the gods. Any information you can gather for me on this matter will be well received and generously rewarded."

He moved to pour another drink when the Shifter asked with great skepticism and great intrigue, "Drizzt Do'Urden?"

Draygo Quick shrugged again. "Who can know?"

"Erlindir, perhaps," the Shifter replied. She drained her glass and started away, pausing only to glance at the room where the captured Guenhwyvar paced.

"Enjoy your time on Toril," she remarked.

"Enjoy. . . ." Draygo Quick muttered under his breath as she departed. It was not advice he often took.



I did not think it possible, but the world grows grayer still around me and more confusing.

How wide was the line twixt darkness and light when first I walked out of Menzoberranzan. So full of righteous certitude was I, even when my own fate appeared tenuous. But I could thump my fist against the stone and proclaim, "This is the way the world works best. This is right and this is wrong!" with great confidence and internal contentment.

And now I travel with Artemis Entreri.

And now my lover is a woman of ...

Thin grows that line twixt darkness and light. What once seemed a clear definition fast devolves into an obfuscating fog.

In which I wander, with a strange sense of detachment.

This fog has always been there, of course. It is not the world that has changed, merely my understanding of it. There have always been, there will always be, thieves like farmer Stuyles and his band of highwaymen. By the letter of the law, they are outlaws indeed, but does not the scale of immorality sink more strongly at the feet of the feudal lords of Luskan and even of Waterdeep, whose societal structures put men like Stuyles into an untenable position? They hunt the roads to survive, to eat, finding a meager existence on the edges of a civilization that has forgotten—yea, even abandoned!—them.

So on the surface, even that dilemma seems straightforward. Yet, when Stuyles and his band act, are they not assailing, assaulting, perhaps even killing, mere delivery boys of puppet masters—equally desperate people working within the shaken structures of society to feed their own?

Where then does the moral scale tip?

And perhaps more importantly, from my own perspective and my own choices, where then might I best follow the tenets and truths I hold dear?

Shall I be a singular player in a society of one, taking care of my personal needs in a manner attuned with that which I believe to be right and just? A hermit, then, living among the trees and the animals, akin to Montolio deBrouchee, my long-lost mentor. This would be the easiest course, but would it suffice to assuage a conscience that has long declared community above self?

Shall I be a large player in a small pond, where my every conscience-guided move sends waves to the surrounding shores?

Both of these choices seem best to describe my life to date, I think, through the last decades beside Bruenor, and with Thibbledorf, Jessa, and Nanfoodle, where our concerns were our own. Our personal needs ranked above the surrounding communities, for the most part, as we sought Gauntlgrym. Shall I venture forth to a lake, where my waves become ripples, or an ocean of society, where my ripples might well become indistinguishable among the tides of the dominant civilizations?

Where, I wonder and I fear, does hubris end and reality overwhelm? Is this the danger of reaching too high, or am I bounded by fear that will hold me too low?

Once again I have surrounded myself with powerful companions, though ones less morally aligned than my previous troupe and much less easily controlled. With Dahlia and Entreri, this intriguing dwarf who calls herself Ambergris, and this monk of considerable skill, Afafrenfere, I have little doubt that we might insert ourselves forcefully into some of the more pressing issues of the wider region of the Sword Coast North.

But I do not doubt the risk in this. I know who Artemis Entreri was, whatever I might hope he now will be. Dahlia, for all of those qualities that intrigue me, is dangerous and haunted by demons, the scale of which I have only begun to comprehend. And now I find myself even more off-balance around her, for the appearance of this strange young tiefling has put her mind into dangerous turmoil.

Ambergris—Amber Gristle O'Maul of the Adbar O'Mauls—might be the most easily trusted of the bunch, and yet when first I met her, she was part of a band that had come to slay me and imprison Dahlia in support of forces dark indeed. And Afafrenfere . . . well, I simply do not know.

What I do know with certainty, given what I have come to know of these companions, is that in terms of my moral obligations to those truths I hold dear, I cannot follow them.

Whether I can or should convince them to follow me is a different question all together.

-Drizzt Do'Urden



ARK CLOUDS ROILED OVERHEAD, BUT EVERY NOW AND THEN, THE MOON-light broke through the overcast and shined softly through the room's window, splashing on Dahlia's smooth shoulder. She slept on her side, facing away from Drizzt.

The drow propped himself up on his elbow and looked at her in the moonlight. Her sleep was restful now, her breathing rhythmic and even, but shortly before she had flailed about in some nightmare, crying out, "No!"

She seemed to be reaching out with her hands, to catch something perhaps or maybe to pull something back.

Drizzt couldn't decipher the details, of course. It reminded him that this companion of his was truly unknown to him. What demons did Dahlia carry on those smooth shoulders?

Drizzt's gaze lifted from her to the window, and to the wide world beyond. What was he doing here, back in the city of Neverwinter? Biding time?

They had returned to Neverwinter after a dangerous journey to Gauntlgrym, and on that journey had found many surprises, and a pair of new companions, dwarf and human. Entreri had survived unexpectedly, for the sword, which he had been convinced was the cause of his longevity, had been destroyed.

Indeed, when Drizzt had tossed Charon's Claw over the rim of the primordial pit, he had done so with the near certainty that Artemis Entreri would be destroyed along with the blade. And yet, Entreri had survived.

They'd ventured into the darkness and had come out victorious, yet neither Drizzt nor Dahlia had relished the adventure, or could now savor in the victory. For Drizzt, there remained lingering resentment and jealousy, because Dahlia and Entreri had shared much over the last days, an intimacy, he feared, even deeper than that which he knew with Dahlia. Drizzt was her lover, Entreri had merely kissed her—and that, when Entreri was certain that he was about

to die. Yet it seemed to Drizzt that Dahlia had emotionally opened herself to Entreri more than she ever had to him.

Drizzt glanced back at Dahlia.

Was he here in Neverwinter distracting himself? Had his life become nothing more than a series of distractions until at long last he would find his own grave?

Many times in his past, Drizzt had given himself to the Hunter, to the fighter inside seeking battle and blood. The Hunter smothered pain. Many times in the past, the Hunter had kept Drizzt safe from his torn heart as the days passed and the wounds mended a bit, at least.

Was that what he was doing now, Drizzt wondered? The notion seemed obscene to him, but was he, in fact, using Dahlia the way he had used battle-field enemies in times past?

No, it was more than that, he told himself. He cared for Dahlia. There was an attraction based on more than sexuality and more than a need for companionship. The many layers of this elf woman teased him and intrigued him. There was something within her, hidden—even from her, it seemed—that Drizzt found undeniably appealing.

But as his gaze again lifted toward the window and the wider world, Drizzt had to admit that he was indeed doing nothing more than biding his time—to let the sting of the final dissolution of the Companions of the Hall fade away. Or likely it went even deeper.

He was afraid, terrified even.

He was afraid that his life had been a lie, that his dedication to community and his insistence that there was a common good worth fighting for was a fool's errand in a world too full of selfishness and evil. The weight of darkness seemed to mock him.

What was the point of it all?

He rolled to the side of the bed and sat up. He thought of Luskan and Captain Deudermont's terrible fall. He thought of Farmer Stuyles and his band of highwaymen, and the gray mist in which they lived, caught somewhere between morality and necessity, between the law and the basic rights of any living man. He thought of the Treaty of Garumn's Gorge, which had established an orc kingdom on the doorstep of the dwarven homeland—had that been King Bruenor's greatest achievement or his greatest folly?

Or worse, did it even matter?

For many heartbeats, that question spun in the air before him, out of reach. Had his life been no more than a fool's errand?

"No!" Dahlia said again and rolled around.

The denial rang out within Drizzt even as it reached his ear. Drizzt glanced back over his shoulder. She lay on her back, at peace in slumber again, the

moonlight splashing across her face, bright enough to hint at her blue woad tattoo.

No! Drizzt heard again inside his heart and soul, and instead of the failures and the losses, he forced himself to remember the victories and the joys. He thought of young Wulfgar, under his and Bruenor's tutelage, who grew straight and strong and who brought together the barbarian tribes and the folk of Ten-Towns in peace and common cause.

Surely that had been no pyrrhic victory!

He thought of Deudermont again, not of the final defeat, but of the many victories the man had known at sea, bringing justice to tides run wild with merciless pirates. The final outcome of Luskan could not erase those efforts and good deeds, and how many innocents had been saved by the good captain and crew of *Sea Sprite*?

"What a fool I've been," Drizzt whispered.

He threw aside his indecision, threw aside his personal pain, threw aside the darkness.

He rose and dressed and moved to the door. He looked back at Dahlia, then walked back to her side, bent low, and kissed her on the forehead. She didn't stir, and Drizzt quietly left the room, and for the first time since the fall of King Bruenor, he walked with confidence.

Down the hall, he knocked on a door. When there came no immediate response, he knocked again, loudly.

Wearing only his pants, his hair a mess, Artemis Entreri pulled the door open wide. "What?" he asked, his tone filled with annoyance, but also a measure of concern.

"Come with me," Drizzt said.

Entreri looked at him incredulously.

"Not now," Drizzt explained. "Not this night. But come with me when I leave the city of Neverwinter behind. I have an idea, a . . . reason, but I need your help."

"What are you plotting, drow?"

Drizzt shook his head. "I cannot explain it, but I'll show you."

"A ship sails for the south in two days. I plan to be on it."

"I ask you to reconsider."

"You said I didn't owe you anything."

"You don't."

"Then why should I follow you?"

Drizzt took a deep breath again the incessant cynicism. Why was everyone around him always asking "what's in it for me?"

"Because I ask this of you."

"Do better," said Entreri.

Drizzt stared at him plaintively. Entreri started to close the door.

"I know where to find your dagger," Drizzt blurted out. He hadn't intended to say it, indeed he'd never planned to help Entreri retrieve it.

Entreri seemed to lean forward just a bit. "My dagger?"

"I know where it is. I've seen it recently."

"Do tell."

"Say you'll come with me," Drizzt said. "The road will lead us there soon enough." He paused for a moment, then had to add, for his own sake if not for Entreri's, "Come with me no matter what, setting aside the dagger or anything else you might gain. You need this journey, my old enemy, as much as I do." Drizzt believed that claim, for though the plan formulating in his thoughts would take him on an important personal journey, the approach might prove even more important to Artemis Entreri.

This conflicted and deeply scarred man standing before him might well be the measure of it all, Drizzt thought.

Would the journey of Artemis Entreri vindicate him, or make a greater lie of his life?

Entreri seemed to be trying to unwind that last sentence when Drizzt turned his focus back to him once more.

"Any road is as good to me as any other," Entreri replied with a shrug. Drizzt smiled.

"At first light?" Entreri asked.

"There is something I must do first," Drizzt explained. "I will need a day, perhaps two, and then we will go."

"To retrieve my dagger," Entreri said.

"To find more than that," Drizzt replied, and as Entreri swung the door closed, he added under his breath, "for both of us."

Drizzt's stride was much lighter as he returned to Dahlia's side. Outside, the night continued to clear, the moon shining brighter.

That seemed fitting to Drizzt as he glanced out the window, for he looked out at the world now with a new light and a new hope.

Suddenly.



Drizzt and Dahlia meandered along the forest road south and east of the city of Neverwinter—meandered because the eager drow had allowed Dahlia to set the pace. Drizzt hadn't expected her to accompany him out here this day, and hadn't asked her to do so. He sought the house of a red-haired seer,

Arunika, who had once offered—and hopefully would again offer—insights about Guenhwyvar.

Pale sunlight cast long shadows through the tree branches and speckled the ground before them, shining orange among the many fallen leaves. Winter had not yet arrived, but it was not far off. Some of the trees had turned to their autumn colors and now lay bare against the chill wind, while others stubbornly clung to the last leaves of the season.

"Why are we here?" Dahlia asked, and not for the first time.

The words brought Drizzt from his contemplation, and annoyed him more than a little. He thought to remind Dahlia that she had come out of her own volition, and perhaps even to add that he would have preferred it if she had remained in the city with the others.

He thought about it, but he knew better than to say it.

Still, he let her words go. This was his realm, the forest, the domain of his goddess, the place where he was most reminded of the vastness of nature. Such a humbling notion allowed Drizzt to keep perspective on those problems and issues that troubled him. In the grand scheme of the world, the cycle of life and death, the vastness of the celestial spheres, so many "problems" seemed not to matter.

But Dahlia prompted him again with the same question.

"You could have remained in Neverwinter," Drizzt replied before he could consider his words.

"You don't want me beside you?" Dahlia said, a rough edge coming quickly to her voice, and Drizzt could only sigh, realizing that he had fallen into her trap. He was trying to make sense of his relationship with Dahlia, perhaps most of all, and so was she, he understood. But alas, logic and reason seemed oft trumped by more basic and powerful emotions in issues of personal relationships.

"I'm glad you're here," Drizzt told her. "I only wish that you were glad too."

"I never said—"

"You have asked a dozen times why we're here. Perhaps there is no purpose, other than to enjoy the sunlight through the forest canopy."

Dahlia stopped and stared hard at him, hands on hips, and Drizzt could not help but pause and return the look.

Dahlia shook her head. "This last few days you've been full of thought. You hardly hear my words. You're here beside me and yet you aren't. Why are we here?"

Drizzt sighed and gave a nod. "The journey to Gauntlgrym has left me with more questions than answers."

"We went to destroy the sword. We destroyed the sword."

"True enough," Drizzt admitted. "But—"

"But Artemis Entreri remains," Dahlia interrupted. "Does this trouble you so much?"

Drizzt paused and considered the myriad questions in his mind, after dismissing the question Dahlia had just asked. In the end, the matter of Entreri really was a minor thing when weighed against the true purpose of this day in the forest: to discern anything he might about Guenhwyvar.

"Is there a purpose to your life now?" he asked. She fell back a step and assumed a more defensive posture, studying him carefully.

"Since we have joined together, we have moved through several quests," Drizzt explained. "All urgent. We put the primordial back in its magical trap. We sought revenge on Sylora, and on Herzgo Alegni, and then we went and freed Entreri from the insidious enslavement of the sword. Our roads have been a matter of small, but important needs, but what is the greater purpose binding them together?"

Dahlia looked at him as if he'd just grown a second head. "To survive," she replied sarcastically.

"Not so!" the drow countered. "We could have left the region to the primordial forces. We could have walked far away from these enemies."

"They would have followed."

"In body, or simply in your dreams?"

"Both," Dahlia decided. "Sylora would have tried to find us, and Alegni. . . ." She spat upon the ground.

"And so our road has been determined by immediate needs."

Dahlia shrugged and continued to look rather unimpressed.

"But what now?" he asked.

"You're not asking me," Dahlia replied. "You're merely preparing me for whatever road you deem worthy."

Drizzt could only laugh and shrug at that for many heartbeats. "I'm asking," he said at length. "Asking you and asking myself."

"Let me know when you find an answer," the elf woman replied and turned back to the north, toward Neverwinter.

"A bit farther," Drizzt said before she had gone more than a couple of steps. Dahlia stopped and turned. "Why?" she demanded.

"Arunika the Seer," Drizzt admitted. "I wish to speak with her again regarding Guenhwyvar." He stared at her for just a moment longer, then turned and shrugged and moved along to the south. Dahlia was quick to catch up.

"You might have told me that when we left," Dahlia said.

Drizzt merely shrugged. Did it even matter? He wasn't even sure where Arunika's house might be. Somewhere in the south, Jelvus Grinch had told him, but no one seemed to know precisely.

On his previous meeting with her, after the defeat of the Shadovar in Neverwinter and before the journey to Gauntlgrym, the seer had claimed that she could sense no connection at all between the statuette Drizzt carried and the panther it was used to summon. Nothing had changed, as far as Drizzt could tell.

Still, before he left this place, he had to try one last time. He owed that, and so much more, to his most loyal companion.

With all of those thoughts stirring in his mind, Drizzt nearly walked right past a side trail marked by a recent passage of a large band, something the astute ranger would rarely miss. He spun around at the last moment and moved back to the side trail, bending low to examine the soft ground. Dahlia moved up beside him.

"Not so old," the elf woman remarked.

Drizzt crouched lower, feeling the solidity of the ground, inspecting one clear print more carefully. "Goblins." He stood and looked into the forest. Perhaps this side trail led to Arunika's house, he thought. Had she been assailed by the filthy little beasts?

If so, he'd likely find a bunch of dead goblins scattered about Arunika's undamaged house. The woman was deceptively formidable, by all accounts.

"Or Ashmadai," Dahlia replied, referring to the devil-worshiping zealots who had formed Sylora Salm's army in Neverwinter Wood. Since the fall of Sylora, this force had scattered throughout the region, or so the Neverwinter guards had told them.

"Goblins," Drizzt insisted. He took a few steps along the small trail, then looked back to Dahlia, who didn't follow.

"They could strike at any of the caravans coming up from Waterdeep before the winter snows," Drizzt said, but Dahlia merely shrugged and seemed unimpressed.

Her indifference stung Drizzt, but it was not unexpected. He understood that he had a long road ahead of him indeed if he ever hoped to encourage her to look out for the needs of others.

She smiled, however, and took up her walking stick, the magical stave known as Kozah's Needle, and moved past Drizzt, heading along the small trail, deeper into the forest.

"We haven't fought anyone in a tenday and more," she remarked. "I could use the practice . . . and the coin."

Drizzt stared back at the road for some time as the elf woman moved away from him. There wasn't much altruism flowing forth from her in words, but perhaps it was there nonetheless, buried under the chip that weighed upon her strong shoulders.

She had returned to Gauntlgrym and the primordial, after all, and though she could pretend she had done so simply to strike back at Sylora Salm, Drizzt knew better. Guilt had driven Dahlia back to that supreme danger in that dark place. That guilt was wrought of her need to right the wrong she had helped facilitate, for she had played a role in freeing the monstrous fire being and thus a role in the catastrophe that had obliterated Neverwinter a decade before.

Buried within Dahlia was compassion, empathy, and a sense of right and wrong. Drizzt believed that, though he feared that he believed it because he had to. A short while later, the sun still high overhead, Drizzt crouched low and peered through the tangle of branches before him. He held up his fist, signaling Dahlia to stay back. The goblins were ahead, not far, he knew, for he could smell them. Likely, they had set a camp just ahead, buried in the shadows of a grove of thick maples and a few boulders, for goblins did not like the sunlight and traveled only rarely in the daytime.

He motioned for Dahlia to move off to the right flank, then held his breath as the elf woman started away, her footsteps crunching in the leaves. Was she even trying to be careful, Drizzt wondered? Or was she just being petulant?

Drizzt shook his head, trying to let it go. The brown carpet of autumn lay thick about the ground. Even Drizzt, dark elf and skilled ranger, would have trouble moving silently in this region. So, no matter, he told himself. He drew Taulmaril, set an arrow, and crept ahead, trying to gain a better vantage. At last, he spotted the camp—or what was left of it.

Drizzt stood up straight and glanced over at Dahlia, his expression telling her that she need not take care to be silent any longer. Someone, or something, had beaten them to the camp—and had destroyed the place and the inhabitants.

Dead goblins lay scattered haphazardly about the ground, their shredded, bug-ridden blankets all around. Wisps of smoke still rose from several small logs, the remnants of a cooking fire, likely, which also had been thrown around in the apparent scuffle.

Drizzt removed his arrow, placed it back into the quiver, and slid Taulmaril over his shoulder, as Dahlia appeared at the side of the camp. She came in with a wide smile on her pretty face, and Drizzt found himself unable to look away from her in the morning light—indeed, in a different light than he had known during their recent conversations.

Her black, red-streaked hair was in that pretty bob again, bouncing lightly around her shoulders under her fashionable wide-brimmed black leather hat, its right side pinned up. The sun speckled down on her through the trees, dancing around the woman's blue-dyed facial woad. In the morning light, those markings didn't seem fierce to Drizzt, but somehow soft and even innocent, like freckles on a dancing child.

The drow reminded himself that Dahlia was a master of disguise and manipulation. She was, in all possibility, manipulating him even then. But still, he could not pull his eyes away from her.

She wore her black raven cape thrown back from her shoulders, with her white blouse unbuttoned low, to the tip of her black vest that stretched tight about her lithe torso. Her black skirt, cut short and angled, revealed much of her shapely legs—that which wasn't covered by her tall black boots.

She was the perfect blend of apparent innocence and promising sensuality—in other words, Dahlia was dangerous. And he would do well to always remember that, especially after their adventures with Artemis Entreri.

But Drizzt couldn't wrap his thoughts around Dahlia in any cohesive way. Not now, not ever. He watched her walk into the camp, casually prodding a dead goblin with Kozah's Needle, still formed into a thick walking stick, four feet in length. All at once, she seemed sweet, sexy, and vicious, like she wanted to kiss him, or kill him, and as if it wouldn't matter to her which it might be. How was that possible? What magic surrounded her? Or was it in his mind, Drizzt wondered?

"Someone got here before us," she said.

"It would appear so. Saved us the trouble."

"Stole our fun, you mean," Dahlia replied with a wry grin. She drew a small knife from her belt. "They are offering a bounty on goblin ears in Neverwinter."

"We didn't kill them."

"That will hardly matter." She bent with the knife, but Drizzt stepped over and caught her arm, and brought her back up to stand before him.

"They'll want to know who, or what, did this," the drow said. "Ashmadai? A Netherese patrol?"

Dahlia considered his words for a moment, then glanced back down. "Well," she said, "I know what did it, if not exactly who."

Drizzt followed her gaze to the dead goblin she had rolled. The way it had flopped had exposed its neck, showing two puncture wounds, as if made by fangs.

"Vampire," Dahlia remarked.

Drizzt stared at the wound, seeking a different answer. Perhaps a wolf, he told himself, though he knew that to be ridiculous. A wolf would not have bitten a victim like that only to leave the throat intact. Still, the notion of another vampire was not something Drizzt wanted to embrace. He had seen more than enough of one such creature in the bowels of Gauntlgrym; indeed, Bruenor and Thibbledorf Pwent had been slain by just such a creature.

"You cannot be sure," Drizzt replied, and not just out of a desperate hope, for something seemed amiss to him. He moved to the side, where a broken tent lay tangled around a small branch.

"I have some experience in these matters," Dahlia said. "I know what such wounds look like." Indeed, Drizzt suspected the same vampire, Dor'crae, who had attacked Bruenor in the anteroom to the primordial pit had been Dahlia's lover.

Drizzt tried hard not to focus on the recollection of Dor'crae. He tried to wash that thought away with the image of the pretty elf walking into the camp, tried to bury it under the sheer attraction the woman elicited in him.

And when that didn't work, he fell back on that pervading sense of detachment.

Drizzt drew out a scimitar and used it to flip the torn tent aside, revealing more goblins, or more accurately, goblin parts, strewn on the ground before him. He studied the garish vision, the jagged tears in the clothing and skin. These were wounds better known to Drizzt, who had traveled beside just such a fighter for so many decades.

"Battlerager," he whispered, confused.

"No," Dahlia said. "I've seen these fang marks before . . ." Her voice trailed off as she walked over to him, as she noted, no doubt, the very different carnage at this section of the broken camp.

"Vampire," she insisted.

"Battlerager," Drizzt replied.

"Must you always argue with me?" She asked the question casually, but Drizzt detected an undercurrent of true anger. How many times had that edge crept into Dahlia's voice of late?

"Only when you're wrong." Drizzt tossed her a disarming grin—and he realized it was likely the first lighthearted look he'd offered Dahlia since they'd left the bowels of Gauntlgrym, or more accurately, since he had seen Dahlia and Artemis Entreri share a passionate kiss. "I suppose that might seem like always to you," Drizzt teased, determined to push past his own negativity and jealousy.

Dahlia cocked her head. "Are you finished with your pouting at long last?" she asked.

The question threw Drizzt off balance for a moment, for it seemed to him to be a matter of Dahlia projecting her own foul mood on him. Or perhaps it was a matter of Dahlia admitting that her own pouting—or grieving, or shock, or whatever combination it might be—needed to end.

But the question teased Drizzt on a much deeper level, and likely more deeply than Dahlia had intended. Drizzt couldn't deny the truth of her words.

To Drizzt, Dahlia remained this great contradiction, able to tug his emotions any which way she desired, it seemed, as easily as she changed her hairstyle. But to Entreri . . . nay, her tricks would not work for her with Entreri. For Artemis Entreri knew her, or knew something of her, that went past the hairstyles, the

clear skin or woad, her clothing, seductive or sweet. Before Drizzt, she had stood naked, physically, perhaps, but before Entreri, Dahlia had been naked emotionally, stripped to the core trouble that so haunted her.

Drizzt had only glimpsed that briefly, in the form of a broken and twisted young tiefling warlock and Dahlia's reaction to that creature, Effron.

"What about you?" Drizzt replied. "You have said little in the tendays since we left Gauntlgrym."

"Perhaps I have nothing to say." Dahlia clamped her jaw, as if she were afraid of what might come spilling out should she lose the tiniest bit of discipline. "I have the ears," Dahlia said and began to walk away.

He followed her out of the camp and into the forest once more, moving slowly and bending low, looking for broken stems or footprints. For a long while she walked, finally coming to rest in a sunny clearing where a single, half-buried stone provided a comfortable seat.

Dahlia reclined, removed her hat, and ran her fingers through her hair, allowing the sunbeams to splash over her face.

"Come along," he bade her. "We must learn who or what killed those goblins. There's a vampire about, so you claim."

Dahlia shrugged, showing no interest.

"Or a battlerager," Drizzt went on stubbornly. "And if it is the latter, then we would do well to find him. A powerful ally."

"So I thought of my vampire lover," Dahlia said, and she seemed to take some pleasure when Drizzt grimaced at the reference.

"Will we never speak of what happened in Gauntlgrym?" Drizzt asked suddenly. "The twisted tiefling accused you of murder." Dahlia's expression abruptly changed. She snapped a glare over him.

Dahlia swallowed hard and did not turn her stare from Drizzt for an instant as he took a seat beside her.

"He claimed Alegni was his father," Drizzt pressed.

"Shut up," Dahlia warned.

"He called you his mother."

Her eyes bored through him, and Drizzt expected her to reach out and claw at his face, or to explode into a tirade of shouted curses.

But she didn't, and that, perhaps, was more unsettling still. She just sat there, staring. A cloud passed overhead, blocking the sunlight, sending a shadow across Dahlia's pretty face.

"Implausible, of course, likely impossible," Drizzt said quietly, trying to back away.

Dahlia held perfectly still. He could almost hear her heartbeat, or was it his own? Many moments slipped past. Drizzt lost count of them.

"It's true," she admitted, and now it was Drizzt who looked as if he had been slapped.

"Cannot be," he finally managed to reply. "He is a young man, but you're a young woman—"

"I was barely more than a child when the shadow of Herzgo Alegni fell over my clan," Dahlia said, so very softly that Drizzt could hardly hear the words. "Twenty years ago."

Drizzt's thoughts spun in circles, very easily coming to the dark conclusion of Dahlia's leading words. He tried to respond, but found himself sputtering helplessly in the face of a horror so far beyond him. He thought back to his own youth, to his graduation at Melee Magthere, when his own sister had advanced upon him so lewdly, forcing him to run away with revulsion.

For a moment, he thought to tell that tale to Dahlia, to try to claim some kinship to her pain, but then realized that his own experience surely paled beside her trauma.

And so he sputtered, and finally he reached out a hand to her to pull her close.

She resisted, but she was trembling. The tears that rolled from her blue eyes were formed in profound sadness, he knew, even as she issued a low growl to cover her weakness.

But denial couldn't hold, and anger couldn't cover the scar.

Drizzt tried to pull her close, but she spun away and scrambled to her feet, walking off a few steps, her back to him.

"So now you know," she said, her voice as cold as winter's deepest ice.

"Dahlia," he pleaded, rising and taking a step her way. Should he go to her and grab her, and crush her close against him, and whisper to her that she might let the pain flow freely? Did she want that? She didn't seem to, and yet, she had let Entreri kiss . . .

With a growl of his own, Drizzt dismissed that ridiculous jealousy. This wasn't about him, wasn't about his relationship with Dahlia, and surely wasn't about her moments with Entreri. This was about Dahlia, and her pain so profound.

He didn't know what to say, or what to do. He felt like a child. He had grown up in a place of deceit and murder and treachery as a way of life, perhaps the vilest city in all the world, and so he thought that he had fully inoculated himself against the scars of depravity and inhumanity. He was Drizzt Do'Urden, the hero of Icewind Dale, the hero of Mithral Hall, who had fought a thousand battles and killed a thousand enemies, who had watched dear friends die, who had loved and lost. Ever level-headed, hardened to the dark realities of life . . .

So he had thought.

So he had lied to himself.

This combination of emotions roiling within Dahlia was quite beyond him at that strange moment. This was darkness compounded in darkness, irredeemable and outside any comfort zones Drizzt might have constructed through his own less-complicated experiences. Dahlia had suffered something to her core, a violation beyond even an enemy's sword, with which Drizzt could not empathize and of which Drizzt couldn't even understand.

"Come," Dahlia bade him, her voice even and strong. "Let us find this killer." She walked off into the forest.

Drizzt watched her with surprise, until he recognized that she was now eager for the hunt for no better reason than to find an enemy to battle. The emotions Drizzt had stirred went too deep and Dahlia couldn't find comfort in Drizzt's hesitant embrace and awkward words, and so she needed to find someone, something, to destroy.

He had missed his moment, Drizzt understood. He had failed her.



The monk stood in the main square of Neverwinter, staring at his hands as he turned them around before his eyes.

"That a fightin' practice?" Ambergris asked.

"I'm looking for hints of shadowstuff," Brother Afafrenfere replied curtly. "What have you done to me, dwarf?"

"I telled ye," said Ambergris. "Can't have ye lookin' the part of a shade if ye're to walk the lands o' Toril, now can I?"

"This is not illusion," Afafrenfere protested. "My skin is lightening."

"Is yer heart, then?" the female dwarf asked.

Afafrenfere glared at her.

"How long was ye a shade?"

"I gave myself to the Shadowfell," Afafrenfere protested.

"Bah, but ye fell in love an' nothin' more," the dwarf chided. "How long?"

"You cannot—"

"How long?"

"Three years," Afafrenfere admitted.

"So ye spent the better part of a quarter-century here, and living where, I might be askin', except that I'm already knowin'."

"Oh, are you?"

"Aye, ye got yer training in the mountains aside Damara."

Afafrenfere stepped back as if she had just slugged him. "How could you—?"

"Ye got a yellow rose painted inside yer forearm, ye dolt. Ye think I'm for missin' a clue like that? And I telled ye true back there in Gauntlgrym. Meself's from Citadel Adbar, and Adbar's knowing o' the Monastery o' the Yellow Rose."

"It doesn't matter," Afafrenfere insisted. "I gave myself willingly to Cavus Dun."

"To Parbid, ye mean."

"To Cavus Dun and the Shadowfell," Afafrenfere growled at her. "And now you would take the shadowstuff from me."

"Ye ain't no damned shade," Ambergris insisted. "No more'n meself. Ye're a human, as ye was afore ye ran to darkness. Ye're actin' like I'm stealin' from ye, but know that I'm savin' ye, from yerself, so it'd be seemin'. Ain't nothin' there in the darkness for ye, boy. Ye ain't a born shade, and so ye ain't to get yer desserts there among them grayskins."

"And you were just a spy," Afafrenfere said. "A traitorous spy."

"Might be," said Ambergris, though it was surely more complicated than that. She didn't feel much like explaining herself to the young monk at this time, however. Amber Gristle O'Maul hadn't chosen to go to the Shadowfell to serve as a spy for Citadel Adbar. The adjudicators of Citadel Adbar had sentenced her to that mission for serious indiscretions—it was that or a ball and chain, a mining pick, and twenty years of breaking stone in the lowest mines of the dwarven complex.

"Be happy I was," the dwarf said. "For if not, then be knowin' that Drizzt Do'Urden'd've carved yerself into little monk bits."

"So now I'm supposed to forgive him?" Afafrenfere asked incredulously. "Forgive the fiend who killed Parbid? And I am supposed to forgive you, the traitor, the fake shade? You expect me to change my skin color and pretend that none of that happened?"

"If ye're smart, ye'll be trying to forget the whole o' that last three years," Ambergris replied.

Afafrenfere took a threatening step toward her, but the powerful dwarf didn't back away an inch, and didn't blink.

"Look, boy," she said, waggling a thick finger in Afafrenfere's scowling face, "and while ye're looking, look into yer heart. Ye was never of that dark bunch, not as kin or kind. And ye're knowin' it. Ye might not be no paladin-monk, like them others o' Yellow Rose, but nor are ye any gray-skinned assassin, killin' yer own at the demands o' them Netheril dogs."

"He killed Parbid!" Afafrenfere yelled, and Ambergris was glad to hear that argument alone, for it confirmed her suspicions nicely.

"Parbid attacked him and got what most attackin' that particular drow are sure to be gettin'," Ambergris snarled right back, and now she went up on

her toes and put her fat nose right against Afafrenfere's as she spoke. "Are ye holdin' a blood feud against one who did no more than defend himself from yer own attack?"

Afafrenfere straightened a bit, moving his face away, but Ambergris pursued stubbornly.

"Well, are ye? Are ye really that stupid? Are ye really that ready and eager to die?"

"Oh, fie!" Afafrenfere wailed, throwing his forearm across his eyes as he turned away.

"And don't ye give me none o' them Afafrenfere dramatics!" the dwarf scolded. "I got no time for 'em!"

Afafrenfere turned on her, scowling more than ever.

"Good enough then!" the dwarf roared, and she stomped her booted foot on the cobblestones. "Ye wantin' a gate to the Shadowfell and I'll make ye one, and good enough for ye, and on yer word alone that ye won't be rattin' me out to Cavus Dun or any others."

That had Afafrenfere off-balance, obviously. "Send me back?" he asked rather sheepishly.

"Not soundin' like music to ye, is it?" the dwarf pressed. "Now that yer Parbid's dead, what grayskin's to stand beside ye, human?"

Afafrenfere swallowed hard.

"Ye ne'er was o' that place," Ambergris said quietly. "Quit lying to yerself the way ye're lyin' to me. Harder to do that, ye know. Ye never wanted to go to the Shadowfell. Ye never was one o' them, and ye're likin' yer skin lighter than darker."

"You presume much."

"Be glad that I do, for if I didn't, I'd've tossed ye into the primordial's mouth behind Glorfathel," Ambergris replied, and now she was grinning widely, for she knew that she had won, that her presumptions had been correct. For all her threats and bluster, Ambergris truly liked this overly-dramatic, high-prancing young monk. Wherever love, or passion, or confusion, or whatever it was, had led him, Afafrenfere was not a bad sort. He could do a dirty deed if he had to, but it wasn't the course of first choice for him, as it would have to be were he to survive among the hoodlums and murderers of Cavus Dun.

"I wish you had," a third voice replied, and the two turned to see the approach of Artemis Entreri.

"You were listening to our private conversation?" Afafrenfere accused.

"Oh, shut up," the assassin replied. "Half the damned city was listening, no doubt, and I would be quite grateful if you held such conversations truly in private. I have little desire to remind the folk of Neverwinter of my own origins."

"How grateful?" the dwarf asked, rolling her fingers eagerly.

"Grateful enough to let you both live," Entreri replied.

Maybe it was a joke.

Maybe.

"Where is Drizzt?" Entreri asked.

"Went out this morning with Dahlia," Amber replied.

"Bound for?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Said he'd be back for dinner."

Entreri glanced up at the sky, the sun already nearing its zenith. Then he swiveled about to regard the port, several tall ships bobbing out in the harbor beyond where the river spilled into the Sword Coast.

"Ye're leaving us, then?" the dwarf asked.

"Do have a fine journey," Afafrenfere added, his tone both sarcastic and hopeful.

Entreri stared at him for a moment, locking the monk's gaze with the intimidating expression that had sent so many potential enemies scurrying for dark holes.

But Brother Afafrenfere did not shy from that look, and met it with one equally resolute.

That brought a wicked smile to the face of Artemis Entreri.

"Ah, but ain't we got enough enemies to fight already?" Amber asked, but the two continued to stare at each other, and both continued to smile.

"Tell Drizzt to find me if he can when he returns," Entreri instructed. "Perhaps I will still be within the city, perhaps not."

"And where might ye be if not in Neverwinter?" Amber asked.

"Were that any of your concern, you would already know," Entreri said, and he turned and walked away.



Drizzt allowed himself some space from Dahlia as they wove their way through the forest, his emotions still reeling from their troubling conversation. Dahlia pressed ahead, eager for some tangible enemy, some way to free her anger. She didn't waste a look back a Drizzt, he noted, and he understood that she did not wish to peel the scab from her emotional wound. He had hit her hard with his discussion of Effron, the twisted tiefling. He had pried her tale from her, but perhaps, he now realized, she had not been ready to divulge it.

Or worse, perhaps Dahlia needed something from him that he didn't know how to give.

Drizzt felt very alone at that moment, more so than at any point since Bruenor's death. Dahlia was more distant, quite possibly forevermore, and Drizzt couldn't even call upon that one companion he had known and counted on since the day he'd left Menzoberranzan.

With that troubling thought in mind, the drow dropped his hand into his belt pouch and brought forth the magical figurine. He lifted it up before his eyes and stared into the miniature face of Guenhwyvar—loyal Guenhwyvar, who would not come to his call any longer.

Without even really thinking about it, he called softly to the cat, "Guenhwyvar, come to me."

He stared helplessly at the figurine, feeling the loss profoundly yet again, and so entranced was he that he didn't even notice the gray mist gathering nearby for many heartbeats, so many indeed, that Guenhwyvar was nearly fully formed beside him before he even noted her presence!

And she was there beside him then, fully so. Drizzt fell to his knees and wrapped her in a great hug, calling her name repeatedly. The panther nuzzled back against him, replying in kind as only she could.

"Where have you been?" Drizzt asked. "Guen, how I've needed you! How I need you now!"

It took him a long while to calm down enough to yell out, "Dahlia!" He feared that she'd gone beyond earshot.

His fears proved unfounded, though, for Dahlia came rushing back through the underbrush to his call, her weapon at the ready. She relaxed immediately when she came through the last line, to see Drizzt and the panther together once more.

"How?" she asked.

Drizzt just looked at her and shrugged. "I called to her and she came to me. Whatever magic was hindering her must have dissipated, or perhaps a tear in the fabric between the planes has repaired itself?"

Dahlia bent low, stroking Guen's muscular flank. "It's good to have her back."

Drizzt answered with a smile, and the warmth of that expression only grew as he considered Dahlia stroking the cat's soft fur. There was serenity on her too-often troubled face, a genuine warmth and kindness. This was the Dahlia that Drizzt wished for as a companion. This was the Dahlia he could care for—perhaps even love.

For some reason, he thought of Catti-brie, then, and in his mind's eye, he interposed his memory of his dead wife with the image of Dahlia before him.

"So we do not need to find the seer," Dahlia reasoned.

"So it would seem," Drizzt agreed and he continued to brush and hug Guenhwyvar.

"Well, send the cat off on the hunt, then," Dahlia proposed, her voice and her expression going chilly. "I'm tired of this walking already. Let's find the goblin killer and be done with this adventure."

The suggestion, reasonable as it seemed, rang out like a broken bell in Drizzt's heart. He wasn't about to separate from Guenhwyvar if he could help it. And more than that, Dahlia's tone struck him badly. She didn't think of this hunt in the forest south of Neverwinter as any grand or important adventure. She was up for a fight—when was she not?—but that was purely for selfish reasons: the need to let free her rage, or more goblin ears for coin. For personal gain of one sort or another.

Like their lovemaking, he mused. Earlier he had pondered that he was using Dahlia, but was that insincerity not mutual?

The safety of the road, the betterment of those around her . . . these emotions did not resonate within Dahlia's scarred heart. Not to any great degree, at least, and certainly not enough for Drizzt to see her in the same light in which he had once viewed his beloved Catti-brie.

He looked up at the sky.

"Night draws near," he said. "If we hunt a vampire as you suspect, we're better off meeting it in daylight." He looked back at Guen and scratched her neck. "We'll return here tomorrow morning."

Dahlia looked at him skeptically for just a moment and seemed ready to argue their course. But then she replied, as if in epiphany, "You fear that you will have to dismiss the cat to her home and will again have trouble recalling her."

Drizzt didn't argue the point. "Can you give me this much at least?" he pleaded.

His question seemed to hit the elf woman hard. She held out her hand to him, and when he took it, Dahlia pulled him to his feet and crushed him in a hug, whispering, "Of course," into his ear over and over again.

And there was desperation in her tone, Drizzt knew, and he knew, too, that he really didn't know how to react.

She was, yet again, not the person he had just decided she was.